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“Trust Me, I Am the One Who Will Drain the Swamp”: An Interview With Walden Bello on Fascism in the Global South

Wolfram Schaffar

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Since the election of Narendra Modi in India in 2014 and Donald Trump in the USA in 2016, political analysts and commentators around the globe have increasingly used the concept of fascism to capture the rise of new right-wing authoritarianism in various countries. Activists and academics in Europe are much more reluctant to use the word fascism, for several reasons. One reason is that – because of the alarming associations which fascism evokes in German – the term was often instrumentalized, and used to discredit political opponents, without a sound theoretical analysis. There is also a big reluctance to transfer the term to countries outside Europe, especially to the countries in the South – because it would further relativize the concept. Walden Bello is a prominent voice who started using the concept of fascism since early 2017 for the new regime under Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. He repeated his analysis of Duterte as a “fascist original” and his regime as “creeping fascism” at the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) in July 2017 as well as in recent articles (Bello, 2017). In October 2017, Bello was among the founding members of a new group, the *Laban ng Masa* coalition to combat the “fascist” policy of Duterte (Villanueva, 2017). In his most recent paper in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, he broadened his analysis and compared the rise of Fascism in Italy in the 1920s with the establishment of the New Order under Suharto in Indonesia in 1964/1965, Chile at times of the coup d’état in 1973, Thailand in 1976, and the Philippines today (Bello, 2018). With his articles and his political campaigns, he opened a new chapter of academic discussion and political activism on fascism in the South. Walden Bello is currently a professor of sociology at the State University of New York at Binghamton and senior research fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies of Kyoto University in Japan. He served as a member of the House of Representatives of the Philippines from 2009 to 2015, during which he was chairman of the Committee on Overseas Workers Affairs. In our interview conducted in December 2017, we discussed theoretical problems in dealing with the concept of fascism as well as strategic challenges for political activism.

Keywords: Fascism; Middle-Class; New Authoritarianism; Philippines; Thailand

Σ

WOLFRAM SCHAFFAR: *Since early 2017, you started using the word fascism for the new regime under Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. Recently, in a meeting of academics and activists from different parts of the world on the current rise of authoritarianism, many participants from the South rejected the analysis of a new fascism as too alarming and Eurocentric. They argued that in the South, people have continuously been exposed to authoritarian regimes of different kinds. Now, you do use the term fascism, you use it for regimes and movements outside Europe, at different historic periods, and with an explicit political agenda. What is the basis of your analysis?*

WALDEN BELLO: Since the post-war period there have been several right-wing dictatorships that have taken over a number of countries in the South. Rather than stressing too much the nomenclature – whether to use fascist, neo-fascist, or something else – for me the important thing in terms of looking at these movements in the South has been the counter-revolutionary aspect that they have. Are they a counter-revolutionary force, reacting to an upsurge of the left or a reaction to a failure of liberal democracy to deliver the goods? The other thing important to me has been the role of the middle-class. In quite many countries where right-wing dictatorships took over, these two aspects – counter-revolution against a perceived revolutionary threat or a counterrevolution in the sense of disaffection with liberal democracy and the central role of the middle-class in these movements – have been really the focus of my attention. When people say that we always had such phenomena in the Global South I think, that on the one hand that’s true. But what I would say, though, is that, on the other hand not all these dictatorships that have prevailed in the South would count as counter-revolutionary or fascist. Some of them would be just pure predatory governments such as the government of Mobutu in the Congo in Africa and Marcos in the Philippines. In my study, I have looked at Indonesia, Chile, Thailand, and the Philippines at different historic periods (Bello, 2018). What I think distinguishes these regimes is the counter-revolutionary aspect that they have. That would fit the fascist tag.

SCHAFFAR: *Now one thing you are mentioning is this disaffection with liberal democracy. Isn’t that a little bit too weak? Fascism in the 1930s came as a reaction to an enormous economic crisis. Wouldn’t you see an economic trigger and not just disaffection with liberal democracy?*

BELLO: Well right, what I understand from my acquaintance with European history is that fascism certainly in Italy and in Germany were responses to what was perceived as threats from the left. Whether real or not, there was a strong perception that the left was the enemy. I think the secondary aspect of this process was a disaffection with liberal democracy. This disaffection took different forms in France, Britain, or in Germany. But the disaffection with liberal democracy was about the perception that it had proven to be a weak barrier against the rise of the left. Moreover, many classes in Germany and France had never been reconciled to the emergence of democracy. Now, in terms of the countries that I have looked at in my study (Bello, 2018), this certainly is very much the case in the Philippines. I think the left is quite weak in the Philippines, so I don’t think that the mobilization of the middle-class for Duterte could be explained with a revolutionary threat. But what happened is that the middle-class, which was behind the 1986 EDSA¹ uprising and was a central force behind bringing forth democracy in the Philippines, basically has now turned around, precisely because the expectations that had come with the liberal government were not fulfilled. From being the base of a EDSA revolution now the middle-class has become the base of Dutertismo because of the failure of the EDSA uprising.

1 EDSA is the acronym for Epifanio de los Santos Avenue in Metro Manila. Since all major demonstrations took place on this highway, it stands for the uprising against President Marcos. Walden Bello also uses the term “EDSA republic” for the political system which was established after the ousting of Marcos.

Fascism comes in different ways in different countries. But there are some similarities with respect to Thailand, which I also have looked at in my study. In 1992 the democratic upsurge, which people thought would finally put an end to authoritarian rule, was a middle-class based revolution. But when that system and the emergence of Thaksin began to provide the opportunity for the lower classes to organize for class demands, then the middle-class goes into a different direction, which is to endorse the right-wing military regime. So, this is the difference between the disaffection with liberal democracy in the European interwar period and what we see right now happening in some countries in the South like the Philippines and Thailand.

SCHAFFAR: *Thailand seems to be a very clear case: The rural poor make good use of the electoral system, the middle-class feels threatened and demands to abolish the entire system of voting, introduces this corporatist way of political representation, very close to 1920's Portuguese estado novo. But in the Philippines, we are struck by the rate of approval which Duterte enjoys. If Duterte is supported by currently 85% of the population, then it's more than the middle-class. It seems to be a broad class alliance.*

BELLO: Yes definitely, I would be the first to say that large numbers of people that are marginalized at some point – workers in traditional industries, the poor – were definitely part of the electoral wave that brought Duterte to power. But when I am talking about the middle-class, I focus on ideological activists – the people who dominate the internet, the people who express their anger in all sorts of ways via the internet. These are not working-class people, these are definitely middle-class people, including a whole range from lower-middle-class people to the elite who are very much supportive of Duterte. In the case of the Philippines, there is definitely more than a middle-class base. But the distinction I make is that – drawing on Gramsci's concept of active and passive revolution – the middle-class has an active consensus whereas the poor classes are more passive.² Their link is also weak. Especially now, that it is becoming clear that the people who were being killed by the regime are mainly from poor communities. There is a wider and wider acceptance that Duterte, in his so called “war on drugs”, is waging a war against the poor. This is why Duterte's base among the poor is eroding; slightly perhaps at this point, but it is going to be a big problem if the government does not deliver in terms of economic goods or social reform. That will determine the future of this regime: Will it deliver on social reform?

SCHAFFAR: *Do you have an explanation why in so many countries new authoritarianism/fascism comes exactly at this point of time, both in the North and the South?*

BELLO: What unites the North and the South has really been the experience of globalization, the kind of corporate-driven globalization with its accompanying neoliberalism

2 Antonio Gramsci's distinction between an “active” and “passive revolution” was a contribution to the Marxist debate on the nature of fascism in the early 1930s (Gramsci, 2011). The question was in how far fascism has to be analyzed as purely reactionary and counter-revolutionary, or also shows revolutionary elements. Gramsci argues that there are revolutionary elements to be considered – albeit in a short-lived, top down process, where subaltern masses are incorporated only passively. A “passive revolution” in his sense describes the development of a new political formation without any reordering of social relations.

which has created tremendous problems in the North in terms of the expectations and institutions that supported the working-class. In the United States, we have seen that with the base of Trump. Those are people who have been hurt by globalization. The same happened in the South, for example, with the kind of economic regimes that were promoted by the EDSA republic.³ The common denominator has been that all regimes in the North and in the South endorsed neoliberal policies, and these neoliberal policies have now created all these undercurrent impacts. This is what unites phenomena of rising right-wing movements in the North as well as in the South.

SCHAFFAR: *You are also writing that in the Philippines, there is not much of an ideological orthodoxy. Duterte has no real program – neither political nor economic. But who are the drivers, what are their economic interests? Fascism in the 1920 in northern Italy was about securing the capitalist interests. Is there something that compares to that? Is there a political economy of new authoritarianism?*

BELLO: Depending on the country where it manifests itself, authoritarianism or fascism has its own unique features. In Thailand, what we are seeing is the effort by middle-class to create an ideology that would attack the very basis of democratic rule, which is the majority rule. It is basically the effort to institutionalize this in a system with an Upper House consisting of 250 people that will be hand-picked by the military, and which will be able to overturn any kind of legislation coming from the national assembly. In the discourse, you find a cherry-picking from different theories of democracy – the idea that you need a body that would act as a break on the masses, this notion of the *tyranny of the majority*. We find this kind of re-articulation of conservative drives with some aspects of traditional democratic ideology, coming together and trying to institutionalize it in the new constitution.

In the Philippines, there is no ideology like that. What you have is a discursive style where the president basically leads. He is creating this image, that the country is suffering from what has been brought about by the Yellow Forces⁴ – parts of the traditional elite and all these forces in the past that had adopted Western notions of human rights, Western notions of democracy, but were out of touch with what people really wanted. These were also the people who were corrupt. But it is not articulated in a more coherent ideological form. It is more of an image, it is more of a discourse. The notion of coherence of Duterismo, to some extent, would be like that of Mussolini or Hitler, although there was much more of ideological content of course – both Hitler and Mussolini; Duterte does not have that.

SCHAFFAR: *You also pointed out that migrants – the Philippino/as outside the Philippines – are among the most ardent supporters of Duterte. The same may be true for Thailand, where many Thai abroad are supporting the military regime. Why is that so?*

3 The political system and the governments following the overthrow of the Marco regime.

4 Yellow Forces refer to the people who got into power after the overthrow of Marcos during the EDSA or Yellow revolution. It is sometimes called Yellow revolution due to the presence of yellow ribbons in the demonstration following the assassination of Ninoy Aquino in 1983 – one starting point of the 1986 EDSA revolution.

BELLO: I think if you look at the class affiliation of Philippino/as abroad, quite a number of them are from the lower middle-class: People who are educated but have no economic opportunities in the country, who think that a lot of the problems of the country come from political corruption. Many of them also feel that the big oligarchy has really controlled the country and that the solution to that is a strongman to break that oligarchy as well as to imprison the corrupt politicians. I think this simplistic view is a very strong motivation, which they share with the middle-class people inside the Philippines. The simple issues that people focus on are corruption and oligarchy, and the idea that an authoritarian leader like Duterte is going to break that. So even though they are in a working-class occupation, say in Europe or in the Middle East, their ideological cast is still very much in the middle-class. The structural analysis, which focuses on land grabbing in the Philippines, on globalization, on the structures that keep the Philippines marginalized in the global economy, is ignored. Also, many of the people who are abroad are women who have left their families behind. They have been particularly permeable to the appeals of Duterte's war on drugs. This idea that all that they have worked for will be taken away by drug addicts who will corrupt their children is a very effective electoral mechanism and Duterte was able to appeal.

SCHAFFAR: *You have set up new coalition in the Philippines countering Duterte's politics. What is the specific strategy? When we look into history for instance, Otto Bauer in Austria strongly argued to defend parliamentarism as a strategy to counter fascism, because they were confident that they would win on the parliamentary floor. But if – according to your analysis – the parliament and the democratic institutions as we know them are discredited, what can be our vision to argue for, in order to counter new authoritarianism?*

BELLO: There is definitely a lot of educational effort that needs to be done, because we cannot be defending a system that has failed. Clearly what happened in the Philippines was that the elites – economic and political elites – were able to hijack the EDSA revolution. The economic structures were frozen. At the same time there was electoral competition, but only electoral competition among the elites. What we need to do is to move people to understand that the reason the EDSA revolution failed was that it was corrupted by the elites which brought the system into an anti-democratic direction. We need to fight for a thorough economic change: Pushing for completing the land reform and fighting for the right of labor. On the democratic front we need to move from a system of very limited representative democracy to a more participatory democracy. As you can see it's a tall order at this point in time. On the one hand, you have to defend an open system, but at the same time not defend the processes and the discourse that in fact led it to become quite ineffective. This is a challenge of the left all over at this point of time. How do we divorce ourselves from the formal democracies that have been corrupted by corporate driven globalization and have a different vision that is much more profoundly democratic? I think that is really the big challenge to all of us at this point of time. It's a big challenge because I think whether it's in the North or in the South, the big enemy that we are up against are authoritarian figures like Trump that promise simplistic solutions. "Trust me, I am the one who will drain the swamp" – that is what he says about the elites in Washington, establishing this personalist relationship between him as an authoritarian figure and

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the people. This is what figures like Trump and Duterte have in common, and we will be having more and more figures like them coming up on the political scene all over.

SCHAFFAR: *Did it help your discussions and your political campaigns in the Philippines to call Duterte a fascist? Does it trigger something in the Philippines’ discourse? Obviously, it doesn’t trigger that much in Thailand.*

BELLO: The problem we have in the Philippines is that, to some extent, “fascist” to many people is still a foreign word. Although some of us might feel that it expresses precisely what the regime is all about, in that it combines a charismatic figure with a middle-class based authoritarian project. Maybe we need to have a better term for it, but for the meantime, popularizing what fascism means, is the best way to go. First, we need to break down what we mean by fascist. And then we need to engage people to think whether this is what Duterte fits to, whether we agree with the future that he is offering. The discourse is going to be one of the terrains, and so far we still have to win the battle on discourse, because the Duterte discourse obviously has captured quite a number of people.

SCHAFFAR: *A final question: Considering the correlations and mechanisms in different countries, what would be an international answer, an international strategy to counter these new authoritarian / fascist tendencies?*

BELLO: I think it would be extremely important to link up with kindred spirits everywhere. But the analytical expertise has to go hand-in-hand with the political effort. I think international solidarity will be very important at two levels: One is of course exchanging our analysis of these different regimes, and secondly, forming links across borders in which we will be able to help one another in terms of support of our particular new progressive projects. But I think definitely, international solidarity, both at the discursive level, the ideological level, and the level of actual mutual support will be extremely important.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Between 2010 and 2018, Wolfram Schaffar has worked as professor for Development Studies and Political Science at the University of Vienna. Prior to this he worked at the University of Bonn, at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, and at the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) in Leiden. His fields of interest are state theory of the South, social movements, new constitutionalism and democratization processes, as well as new authoritarianism.

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